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# Comment

## The contemporary dialectics of caste politics



IN November 2012, a mob of intermediate-caste Vanniyars stormed into a number of Dalit colonies in a frenzy of looting, destruction and arson. The trigger for this violence was a love marriage between a Dalit man and a Vanniyar woman. The tragic unfolding of that tale – the couple split up under pressure from Divya’s family and the Dalit youth, Illavarasan, subsequently took his own life according to the police – has placed the issue of caste firmly back on the agenda again. For all the Dravidian parties’ claims to represent all castes, and the social indicators suggesting that Tamil Nadu is one of the more progressive and developed state in India, the politics of caste is ever-present as an undercurrent or backdrop to social life. Events, such as that involving these star-crossed lovers, periodically bring the complex interplay between caste, society and politics to the fore.

In December 2013, a group of scholars and activists from UK, India and Europe gathered in a stately hall in the University of Edinburgh to grapple with these issues and discuss the shifting dialectics of caste and politics in Tamil Nadu.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis of the workshop was on discussion and debate rather than a series of presentations, and the aim of this note is to bring the deliberations of those present to a wider audience. Over the course of the day, scholars drew on current research and activists reflected on experiences to raise questions and help understand the contemporary manifestations of caste politics in the state. In what follows, we draw on notes taken during proceedings to offer an overview of the key points.

Looking Back to the Present?: Whilst all of the speakers had a sense of changes over time, two in particular offered historical reflections that sought to place current debates within a wider context. Gajendran Ayyathurai, who has recently completed his PhD from Columbia,<sup>2</sup> spoke of the anti-caste campaigns led by Pandit Ayyothidass (1845-1914), publisher of *The Tamilian* and advocate of Buddhism. Ayyathurai pointed to the importance of ‘demystifying’ Dalit actors and understanding them in context. Ayyothidass’ activism, he observed, was not divorced from the wider society or motivated by a particular and different sub-culture, but was tied into an import business that created a global network of Dalit activists. Crucially, Ayyathurai argues that this network of supporters extended beyond caste lines and sought to create a Tamil identity and language that was free of caste influence. Ayyothidass’ Tamil nationalism, as well as his writings on temples, female foeticide and women’s rights, prefigure the Dravidian movement in important regards.

Rupa Viswanath, Professor of Indian Religions at the University of Göttingen, noted how conflicts over the categorization and classification of caste in the colonial era served to undermine Dalit struggles. In an administrative sleight of hand, discursive terms were reclassified in a way that permitted aggressive servitude and caste-based discrimination to continue unchecked. Central to this

process was the definition of caste inequalities as ‘disabilities in the sphere of the social’; a solution which absolved the state from action and emphasized the need for social reform rather than political action. Viswanath argued that this valorization of social reform and cynicism towards politics continues to inform our understanding of caste. The Dravida Kazhagam’s *symbolic* attacks on caste, thus, are endowed with an aura of radicalism even though the over-determination of social solutions effectively justifies the under-enforcement of legal provisions. She highlighted the need to understand contemporary Dalit politics in light of historical legacies that have served to neuter Dalit politicians and constitutional provisions.<sup>3</sup>

Dravidianism and the Dalit Challenge: The Dalit intellectual and former Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (Liberation Panther Party) MLA, Ravikumar, joined the meeting by Skype. He outlined his own journey from a Marxist-Leninist background towards Dalit politics and noted how both Marxist and Dravidian interpretations deny agency to Dalits. Given the dominance of established parties, Ravikumar stressed that he had little faith in the efficacy of parliamentary politics before assuming his role as an MLA, but had come to the conclusion that ‘persuasion is also a form of struggle in Dalit politics.’ He accepted that small parties had to work within the constraints imposed by other parties and by the wider party system, but noted that persistent campaigns could carve out spaces for change within institutional politics.

Ravikumar listed his efforts to transform mud huts into concrete houses, his creation of welfare boards for marginal communities like narikuravas, puthiraivannars, transgenders and folk artists, his championing of legislation for vulnerable communities and the enforcement of the provision of 22.5% of funds for SC/STs in the Constituency Development Scheme as achievements that would not have been possible without electoral engagement. He highlighted numerous other successes, but noted that a lone representative had to work the system and use polite persuasion rather than protest and conceded that ‘without compromise we cannot achieve anything in the political sphere.’

Compromise, he insisted, related to the operation of the party rather than its core ideological underpinnings. Whilst the party holds true to its belief in a caste-free Tamil nationalism, however, he noted that few caste Hindus accept Dalits as Tamils. When pressed on the main challenges facing Dalits today, Ravikumar underlined the need for skills development to be able to compete in the urban labour market and the continued importance of land. He closed by stressing that the state remains a critical resource for Dalits, but the opportunities offered by provisions like the Special Component Plan were too often diverted into common schemes or the ‘freebies’ with which Dravidian parties woo voters in elections. Hugo Gorringe appreciated the difficulties under which Dalit politicians operate in a state dominated by two main parties, but raised questions about the ability and willingness of Dalit parties to create an alternate politics such as that currently promised by the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi. Critical questions were raised about the *autonomy* of Dalit parties that are not only dependent on alliance partners, but sometimes seem subservient to them.

Gorringe accepted Ravikumar’s point about the need to be conciliatory, but questioned whether entry into political institutions and the relational networks involved in doing politics had engendered a culture of compromise and commission amongst those who previously rejected such mechanisms. Finally, he pointed to the current emphasis on Tamil politics and the contradictions entailed

for Dalits in this process. One of the main virtues of a Tamil identity was said to be a reduction in caste violence, but in the wake of Dharmapuri this has been revealed as an empty promise. Dalit politics, it was suggested, is at a crossroads and needs to introspect as well as critique external constraints.<sup>4</sup> One critical issue here is the relationship between Dalit castes in the state. Whilst all Dalit outfits condemned the police firing on Dalits in Paramakudi in 2011, for instance, their failure to stand together on a common platform weakened their voice. An emphasis on Tamil issues, it was suggested, might be detracting from Dalit concerns with caste discrimination. That said, the entry of Dalit parties to institutional politics has compelled other parties to appropriate Dalit symbols and address Dalit issues.

**Intermediate Caste Assertion:** One of the most visible responses to the rise of Dalit parties has been the re-assertion of once dominant intermediate castes in the state, as seen in 2012 by the formation of a ‘Non-Dalit Common People’s Association’. Geert de Neve, Reader in Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex, reported on his research with Grace Carswell in western districts of Tamil Nadu.<sup>5</sup> De Neve pointed towards a ‘new dialectic in the politics of the region’ which has seen increased assertion by Dalits being met by a Gounder response which has fuelled caste antagonism and violence. He drew our attention to the mechanisms and institutions that connect the spheres of social and political life. One central tool that has served to shift caste dynamics out of the fields and villages and into courts and police stations is the 1989 SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, locally known (albeit somewhat misleadingly) as the PCR Act. Whilst conviction rates remain pitifully low, it is important to understand the social ramifications of the act and its role in the shifting contours of caste relations.

De Neve noted how the PCR has emboldened Dalits and frustrated Gounders in equal measure. Though the most common outcome of cases is a compromise, it has afforded Dalits some leverage and challenged Gounder dominance in the region. The increased take-up of the PCR, partly reflects new forms of activism amongst Arunthathiyars – the lowest and least organized of the three main Dalit castes in Tamil Nadu – but also mirrors changes in the rural economy. New opportunities for employment and new government welfare policies (especially NREGA, the Public Distribution System, provision of rice, and housing) have given Dalits, particularly Dalit women, more bargaining power and helped push up local agricultural wages.

Gounders have not taken these transformations lying down, but have mobilized in their turn, uniting around critiques of the PCR, the loss of control over labour and the perception that they have been neglected by Dravidian parties. Such mobilization has seen Gounders reasserting themselves in some areas and resorting to migrant labour to undermine local Dalit assertion. They have also launched a political party to champion their interests in a move that has increased caste sentiment in the region.<sup>6</sup> Andrew Wyatt, senior lecturer in politics at the University of Bristol, noted that the continued significance of caste politics in the state was an indication of the Dravidian party’s inability to speak to and for a wide range of castes. Political entrepreneurs, therefore, mobilize a following by articulating a ‘narrative of losing out due to caste background’ even though there is often a gap between the narrative and reality.<sup>7</sup> Wyatt noted, in this context, that all important politicians in Kongu Nadu *are* Gounders but this has not prevented the emergence of a Gounder party. Part of the attraction of caste parties is the assumption that patronage flows along caste lines, and there is evidence to suggest

that low status individuals do not ‘feel entitled to approach’ politicians from higher castes. For all the talk of multi ethnic parties in Tamil Nadu, Wyatt showed how a handful of caste clusters dominated the number of political representatives and used family links and networks to canvass for votes. For all their dominance, therefore, Dravidian parties are susceptible to caste mobilization.

D. Karthikeyan, PhD candidate at Edinburgh and former correspondent for *The Hindu*, noted Dalit resentment towards the Dravidian parties as a consequence of their differential recognition of various castes. Drawing on his research he pointed towards the political dynamics of caste contention between Thevars (a dominant intermediate caste) and Pallars (the most developed of the three main Dalit castes).<sup>8</sup> Thevar mobilization in the 1980s saw them consolidate their political power through links with the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK). They not only had a huge presence in top political positions and a prominent presence in the police force, but cemented their social position symbolically by securing state recognition for processions to honour their leader Muthuramalinga Thevar. Counter-mobilization by Pallars, therefore, has occurred across both physical and symbolic registers. The occupation of physical space for the annual celebration of Pallar leader Immanuel Sekaran has posed a direct challenge to Thevar supremacy and occasioned such violence that both Thevar and Pallar processions are now heavily controlled and policed.

Most recently, Pallars have extended their counter-mobilization to the realm of historical symbolism in the claim that they rather than Thevars are the descendants of the ancient Tamil kings. Caste politics, thus, is played out in multiple ways. As David Mosse cautioned, however, we should be wary of equating lower caste assertion and aspirations with reality. He noted how caste continues to be ‘operative in less visible ways’. Whilst ‘mobility is a possibility and caste is no bar’, caste continues to influence ones connections, networks and ability to get things done. Whilst Dalit assertion may have shifted caste conflicts out of the fields and into the courts and police stations, therefore, we should not assume that these latter are safe or neutral spaces. Indeed, these environs are often the venue for compromises and *kattapanchayats* (kangaroo courts). These public spaces are also, often, gendered spaces; which brings us to the question of the gendered triggers and outcomes of caste politics.

Caste, Politics and Gender: S. Anandhi, Associate Professor at MIDS in Chennai, elucidated the complex interplay between caste and gender in Tamil Nadu. She observed how the past two decades had witnessed a convergence amongst political parties on a rhetoric of Tamil nationalism that used women as symbols of purity and nationhood and established narratives that simultaneously celebrated and controlled Tamil women. Whilst the focus on Tamil nationalism was supposed to override caste differences, the emphasis on chastity as a virtue reinforced the importance of endogamy.<sup>9</sup> The Paatali Makkal Katchi’s (PMK – an intermediate Vanniyar caste party) campaign against inter-caste marriages, thus, was perfectly in keeping with the underlying logic of the nationalist campaign. It was, however, clearly targeted against Dalits who ‘presumed’ to marry Vanniyaars rather than inter-caste marriages per se.

Anandhi, however, warned against reading the conflict in Dharmapuri as an ahistorical conflict between castes. Caste relations, she noted, are dynamic and need to be read within the socio-economic context in which Dalit mobility is a reality. This mobility, however, occurs within constraints. The developments in welfare and agriculture that De Nevers spoke of above, for instance, places a great

burden upon women who are now shouldered with responsibility for earning, upholding caste pride and negotiating government welfare schemes.

Whilst these development have afforded women some mobility and control over resources, they have also engendered new forms of patriarchy. Anandhi notes how one contingent consequences of these gendered transformations has been a crisis of masculinity and manliness as women assume the role of main provider. The politics of caste identity, she suggests, offers an outlet to caste men seeking to restore their social standing. Significantly such caste politics is not confined to intermediate castes, but colours the relations between different Dalit castes.

Nitya Rao, Professor of Gender and Development at the University of East Anglia, similarly emphasized the need to unpack the contingent processes of social change. Just as different Dalit castes have experienced mobility in different ways, women within these castes also experience such developments differently. In emerging industries, for example, unmarried young women may find employment that is both arduous and poorly remunerated.<sup>10</sup> Older, married women with children find fewer openings in these labour markets, which can lead to domestic tensions as young girls seek to delay marriage to improve their work prospects whilst parents are anxious about dowry and marriage prospects.

Paradoxically, Rao notes, rather than reducing their agency – the ability to *refuse* paid work may be a sign of agency for older women. The contradictory impact of caste mobility is seen, however, in that the increase in ‘house-wification’ is attended by new forms of patriarchy including domestic violence and alcoholism. Rao insisted on the need to address the domestic impacts of mobility as well as the social ones. Loss of pay, she noted, need not mean loss of decision making power since women in her research were found to have a big say in terms of children’s education. Conversely, however, Anandhi noted how all things being equal, educated girls faced greater responsibility to accept low-status jobs or NREGA work whereas men tended not to take on such employment. Both stressed the importance of identifying the local dynamics of caste and labour which differed across the state and from caste to caste. Rao, for example, noted how seniority remains significant amongst landed castes and so female education in these communities did not necessarily result in empowerment. Likewise, ‘Dalits with some land or education aspired to brahminical controls upon their daughters’. This highlights the contradictory effects of development.

Land, Rights and Development: C. Nicholas, activist and Convenor-Founder of the Integrated Rural Development Society and the Dalit Land Rights Federation, insisted that land remained central to any attempts to emancipate Dalits.<sup>11</sup> Land, he noted, is not just a source of employment and sustenance but also a ‘symbol of status and dignity’. One of the major reasons for continuing caste inequalities, he observed, was the inequitable distribution of land despite land reform legislation. Nicholas mapped out a four-fold strategy that entails the redistribution of land; the restoration of land that has been encroached; the protection of land both from local elites and governments interested in farming out lands to industrial parks and Special Economic Zones, and finally, the production from land often written off as unproductive. The rising cost of land and the explosion of real estate has led to the creation of ever more vested interests seeking to control and profit from the control of land than before.

Land grabbing is pervasive and engaged in by all political parties. Against this, Nicholas emphasizes the need to unite all marginalized communities against the

encroachment of land. All too often, however, caste politics obscures the political economy of land and serves as a distraction from pressing developmental concerns. State sponsored land grabs adversely affect the life-chances of impoverished Dalits *and* Vanniyars, but joint action to safeguard land rights and well-being is impeded by casteist politics. Numerous Vanniyar women have been killed by Vanniyar men in the past two years over dowry disputes, for instance, yet the focus is on cross-caste marriages and caste competition. Nicholas, thus, stressed the importance of a political economy approach to caste conflicts.

David Mosse, Professor of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, similarly spoke of 'caste as an instrument of regulation of economy and space.' Mosse outlined the emergence of a Dalit Rights framework in development discourse, but noted how this emphasis on rights was often divorced from an analysis of principal forms of material or economic exclusion. He noted that it was easy to underestimate the role of donors in shaping the discourses of Dalit NGOs even though they shape opportunities on the ground.<sup>12</sup> The Dalitisation of development, thus, was co-produced by NGOs and donors but it operates in a context of increasing state restrictions and constraints. The discursive emphasis on Dalit rights, therefore, has witnessed the proliferation of *sangams* (unions) but has not presided over a major transformation. The danger, he notes, is that Dalit networks are created as the discursive effects of donor priorities, but lack a real organizational presence on the ground. Consequently, analysts need to step back from the appearance of caste politics and caste-based NGOs to understand their organizational forms and vulnerabilities.

The discursive focus of such groups has other impacts too: the stress on Dalit cultural assertion and human rights, for instance, arguably deflected focus from state affirmative action programmes and provisions such as the Special Component Plan until very recently. In this context it is important to recognize the different and shifting frameworks within which Dalit and other caste politics is played out. Increasing transnational linkages serve to inspire particular approaches and constrain others. Equally, however, Dalit NGOs need to operate within local contexts. Mosse, thus, noted how the Dalit Land Rights Federation would raise land as a Dalit issue, but approach 'each piece of land as an individual issue to defuse the communalizing potential of struggles over land'. Finally, Dalit development organizations must be understood within a frustrating national context in which foreign funding and political engagement are suspect and constraints ubiquitous – leading many to move out of the NGO sector into parties or international organizations.

Caste Continuity and Caste Change: Caste is, and always was, dynamic and contingent. In that sense, it could be argued, little has changed. The key then, however, is to try and understand the contemporary manifestations of caste and the drivers of contemporary caste dynamics. There is a pressing need to ask why social relations are expressed and practised in particular ways rather than others. As Anthony Good, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, noted, had the workshop extended to include discussion of politics in Sri Lanka then the emphasis would have been on ethnicity and perhaps religion rather than caste. Understanding the current articulations of caste in Tamil Nadu, in other words, requires both an historical and an empirical approach. Mosse and Viswanath both observed how the colonial principle of non-interference pushed caste into the sphere of cultural or religious issues, to the exclusion of other ways that we might understand caste.

For all the social radicalism of its rhetoric, the Dravidian movement perpetuated this occlusion of caste. Crucially, its emphasis on Tamil identity rested upon an intermediate caste constituency that resisted progressive legislation such as land reforms.<sup>13</sup> Reflecting back on his extended fieldwork, Mosse noted how a Dalit group in his field site structurally altered its position over time. The acquisition of land was pivotal, followed by the acquisition of income through outmigration and the use of the Church as a space for politics. Welfare schemes, as De Neve and Wyatt noted, are also important in changing local dynamics and shifting the balance of power. The effects of these resources, however, are neither uniform nor always predictable and may, as Anandhi and Rao pointed out, have contradictory outcomes.

What is clear from the deliberations over the course of the day is that caste continues to inform socio-political and economic relations and social standing in a Tamil context. How caste is operationalized, however, has shifted significantly over time. There has, as Manor (2012) argues, been 'a decline in the power of caste hierarchies' that is evident in the declining dependence of Dalit labourers, in the increasing use of mechanisms like the PCR and in the rising aspirations of the lower castes in terms of education and employment.<sup>14</sup> As Manor notes, however, this does not mean that caste is no longer significant. Indeed, caste continues to shape peoples' opportunities, life-chances and capacities. What it can no longer do is constrain the aspirations of those from lower castes.

Socio-political mobilization, education and employment opportunities have opened up new horizons for lower castes and have enabled new forms of mobility and assertion. As De Neve above and Harriss (2012) argue, however, locally dominant castes remain powerful both in terms of resources like land and the ability to offer employment, but also in terms of status and symbolism.<sup>15</sup> Thus it is that the use of PCR legislation, marriages between Dalits and intermediate castes or the erecting of Ambedkar statues in public spaces still occasions a backlash from those seeking to retain their social standing. Caste, in this sense, is still very much informed by 'hierarchical values' (Harriss 2012) even if it is increasingly open for negotiation and change at the local level. It is against this context that we should understand the resurgence of caste politics and the language of caste in the land of Periyar.

**Hugo Gorringe and D. Karthikeyan**

\* Report from a Workshop on Caste and Politics in Tamil Nadu.

#### **Footnotes:**

1. More information on the workshop and the ESRC funded research on which it is based may be found here: [http://www.sociology.ed.ac.uk/current\\_research/current/dalit\\_politics](http://www.sociology.ed.ac.uk/current_research/current/dalit_politics)

2. For details see here: <http://dissertationreviews.org/archives/3540>

3. See R. Viswanath, 'Spiritual Slavery, Material Malaise: Missionaries, "Untouchables" and Religious Neutrality in Colonial South India', *Historical Research* 83(219), 2010, pp. 124-45.

4. See H. Gorringe, 'Party Political Panthers: Hegemonic Tamil Politics and the Dalit Challenge', *SAMAJ (South Asia Multi-disciplinary Academic Journal)*: <http://samaj.revues.org/3224>, 2011.

5. See G. De Neve and G. Carswell, 'NREGA and the Return of Identity Politics in Western Tamil Nadu', *Forum for Development Studies* 38(2), 2011, pp. 205-210.

6. On Gounder politics see M. Vijayabaskar and A. Wyatt, 'Economic Change, Politics and Caste',



*Economic and Political Weekly* 48(48), 2013, pp. 103-111.

7. On political entrepreneurs see A. Wyatt, *Party System Change in South India*. Routledge, Abingdon, 2010.

8. See D. Karthikeyan, S. Rajangam and H. Gorringer, 'Dalit Political Imagination and Replication in Contemporary Tamil Nadu', *Economic and Political Weekly* 47(36), 2012, pp. 30-34.

9. See S. Anandhi, 'The Mathammas: Gender, Caste and the Politics of Intersectionality in Rural Tamil Nadu', *Economic and Political Weekly* 48(18), 2013, pp. 64-71.

10. See N. Rao, 'Is the New India Bypassing Women? Gendered Implications of India's Growth', in A. D'Costa (ed.), *A New India?: Critical Reflections in the Long Twentieth Century*. Anthem Press, London, 2010.

11. This Federation is part of a wider network: <http://www.ncdhr.org.in/nfdlrm/about-nfdlrm>

12. For an extended overview of Mosse's research with Christian Dalits in Tamil Nadu, see D. Mosse, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012.

13. N. Subramaniam, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilisation*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999.

14. For Manor's analysis see: [http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633\\_james\\_manor.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633_james_manor.htm)

15. For Harriss' paper see: [http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633\\_john\\_harriss.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633_john_harriss.htm)

## Muslim politics in UP

BEFORE the UP Assembly elections in 2012, it appeared that everybody was keen to travel the extra distance to woo the Muslims in Uttar Pradesh. In a bid to attract Muslim voters, all major political parties fielded a higher number of Muslim candidates than ever before. Compared to the 2007 state elections, the number of Muslims candidates went up from 56 to 61 for the Congress party, from 57 to 84 for the SP and from 61 to 85 for the BSP. Eventually 68 Muslims won their seats, in 64 seats they were placed second and in 10 seats Muslim candidates were both winners and runners up.

In the run-up to the elections, the reservation card was also played. Over the years, the central government and some states had extended the benefits of quotas to lower Muslim 'castes' by grouping them with their Hindu counterparts as OBCs. And four Indian states had created special quotas exclusively for Muslims. This was the backdrop which prompted the Congress to declare 4.5 per cent reservation for minorities in jobs and admissions to educational institutions.

After the 2012 Assembly elections, Mayawati claimed that she lost because the Muslims overwhelmingly voted for the SP and the others also thought likewise. But the election data tells a different story. Although, the Muslim vote for SP increased by 9 percentage points as compared to the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, it went down by 6 percentage points as compared to 2007. So with 45 per cent Muslim votes the SP won only 97 seats in 2007, whereas in 2012, it won 224 seats with only 39 per cent Muslim votes. In fact, this time 39 per cent Muslims voted for the SP, 20 per cent for the BSP and 18 per cent for the Congress. This showed that Muslims had gradually come to exercise a wider choice over the last several elections; moreover, that they had refused to act as a vote bank of one or the other party.

Mulayam Singh had committed the mistake of taking the Muslim vote for granted in 2009, assuming that Muslims had no choice but to vote for the SP. Therefore, he openly courted Kalyan Singh, despite being aware about the general perception in the Muslim mind about BJP's Kalyan Singh on account of his involvement in the demolition of the Babri Masjid. This total disregard to Muslim sensibilities did not go down well with the ordinary Muslim voter and the Muslim vote for SP declined by 15 percentage points.

Moreover, instead of the fear of the BJP acting as a major factor in deciding their vote, the issues of poverty and unemployment have gradually acquired greater significance for Muslims, just as for any other social group. In several rounds of surveys conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) over the last decade, around 70 per cent of the Muslims have consistently maintained these issues to be their primary concern.

Since 2012, after Akhilesh Yadav became chief minister, there have been at least six communal conflicts in which the police has been accused of acting against Muslims. What should have bothered the SP most is the near undivided condemnation of his government by representatives of the Muslim clergy from all the leading seminaries of UP. Hitherto, they have time and again given official and unofficial support to the SP and, in turn, received government benefaction from various SP-led governments in UP.

With the 2014 Lok Sabha elections now underway, the question is – can administrative pacifiers like suspending police officers and ordering a CBI inquiry halt the growing disaffection and anger amongst Muslims against the Samajwadi Party? Sadly for Akhilesh, the scenario appears to be depressing.

By voting for the SP in large numbers in the 2012 Assembly elections, the Muslims of UP reaffirmed their faith in Mulayam Singh Yadav and his son in the hope that the promises he had made would be fulfilled. One major promise, seen as both drastic and contentious, was that when they came to power, cases against Muslims youth who were wrongly arrested on charges of terror would be withdrawn. This was welcomed by democratic and civil rights groups, but more so by Muslims. They were both worried and apprehensive during Mayawati's rule, following a series of raids against and arrests of Muslim youth for their alleged involvement in terror activities. But when Akhilesh came to power, neither did he take any legal steps that would fulfil the promises he had made related to the release of Muslim youth, nor did he launch any policy-related schemes that would address the social and economic backwardness of the Muslim community.

Muslims appear to be disillusioned with the SP after the recent riots in Muzaffarnagar. They felt that the SP, which all through had been projecting itself as the saviour of Muslims, failed to protect their lives and properties. Thousands of Muslims continue to live in camps with no real possibility of an early return to their homes in sight.

It appears that there is a greater scramble for the Muslim vote against this backdrop of a general Muslim disillusionment with the SP. But the Muslim vote today is not a monolithic bloc and is as divided as any other social group. Moreover, as before, there will be no dearth of claimants, mostly religious, masquerading as true representatives of the community. They will try to bargain on behalf of the community in an attempt to get personal benefits in return,

leaving the community in the lurch. But, as seen in the last election, these power-brokers stand exposed and the ordinary Muslim voter has strongly rebuffed them. Religious leaders like Maulana Syed Mohammad Ashraf Kichhouchhwi and Ahmad Bukhari have seen that their 'political' appeals did not cut much ice with the ordinary Muslim voter in the last election. Actually leaders who have based their politics on religious identities in Uttar Pradesh, have vastly overestimated their importance. The Barelvi/Deobandi divide did not matter for the voters in a significant way and Ahmad Bukhari could not even ensure his son-in-law's victory (he lost his deposit) from the Muslim dominated Behati constituency in Saharanpur district. Moreover, this defeat was more glaring as he contested a SP ticket and there was on a SP wave in the state.

It is generally perceived that Muslims defer to religious leaders in making their political choice and are therefore labelled as obscurantist and less secular than other social groups. But in the last election (2012) we saw that the Muslim voters had rebuffed the religious leaders who claimed to represent them, though the political class, which finds it more convenient to deal with them, tried to ensure their continued salience in the political arena. A case in point is the way Mulayam Singh sought to appease Ahmad Bukhari, despite his humiliation by the Muslim voter.

Muslims have always voted, but it now appears that they are using their vote more positively, increasingly supporting candidates they think are better for them and not because s/he belongs to a party beyond which they have no choice. In the heyday of the Congress, the Muslims by and large voted for the party as there was no other option for them. Then, after the rise of the BJP, they voted for a party which was best placed to defeat it. This precarious position of the Muslim voter was exploited by the self-proclaimed secular parties. Since security of life and property was their main concern, the SP and BSP competed with each other in claiming to have ensured it better. Muslims did not have the bargaining capacity to demand their share in development and therefore got nothing substantial in return. Mulayam Singh was able to position himself as the saviour of Muslims and, therefore, get a larger chunk of their votes. Yet, despite getting the largest chunk of votes in all the elections since the 1990s from the Muslims, he neither acknowledged, nor did he take meaningful steps for the uplift of the community.

However, after the communal violence in Muzaffarnagar last year, issues of safety and security have once again come back to haunt the Muslims. Fearful of a Narendra Modi-led BJP coming to power, they might well decide to back the party most likely to keep the BJP at bay. Disillusioned with the SP, and with the Congress unable to present a credible alternative at the state level, the beneficiary could well be the BSP! Not because Muslims would repose faith in the BSP, but because of the absence of any other credible alternative. Muslims might even resort to constituency-wise strategic voting, siding with the candidate most likely to defeat the BJP candidate.

**Mirza Asmer Beg**

